

Let's Not Turn Back the Clock on Welfare Reform

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One of the most important reforms of the past decade was the change to our welfare system passed by Congress in 1996.

By requiring welfare recipients to work and adding time limits for those able to work, the trap of welfare dependency was transformed into a true helping hand. By almost every measure, these reforms have succeeded beyond all expectations.

The 1996 Welfare Reform Act will soon expire, and Congress will take up legislation to re-authorize it. Unfortunately, there will be some attempts to turn back the clock on the work requirements. There is always room for improvement upon legislation once it is enacted, and welfare reform is no exception.

But before we decide to turn back the clock on the reforms of 1996, we ought to take a close look at some of the good things that have happened over the last six years.

First, welfare rolls have been cut in half. Statistics provided by the Congressional Research Service show that from 1995 to 2000 the welfare case load declined 52% and the number of individuals receiving cash welfare payments declined 56%. With fewer people receiving welfare, we are better able to help those people who really need our assistance.

Second, in virtually every category, living standards are better for those in need of help. For example, the employment rate of single mothers on welfare increased 40% during the same period. One third of those leaving welfare earn incomes above 150% of the poverty line. The teen birth rate declined for all age, racial, and ethnic groups, including the largest decline ever for African- American teen pregnancy. Child support collections have grown every year - from \$12 billion in 1996 to \$19 billion in 2001.

These statistics are encouraging, but we can and should do even better. Too many former welfare recipients continue to live in poverty. Many have trouble paying housing and utility bills and putting food on the table. At least one-third of those leaving welfare do not participate in Medicaid, food stamp, or child-care programs because they do not know that they are eligible. Our country's teen pregnancy rate is still higher than most industrialized nations. We need to build on the successes of the program thus far but not revert to the failed policies of the past.

To make even more progress, we will need a rich mix of options because every situation is unique. The President's Faith-Based Initiative acknowledges that federal support in the hands of communities makes a real difference in people's lives. This partnership of government with faith-based community care givers who are close to the needs of people and trusted by those who hurt is the right approach. Government should strive to be a help up, rather than encourage dependency.

Moving from welfare to the workplace can be very disquieting at first for anyone who is attempting to step out of their comfort zone. Making this transition is certainly difficult, but it is also very important. It takes effort, good judgment, and a lot of determination on the part of the person who is making the transition. It also takes effort and good judgment by the government to craft legislation that is fair for the recipients and for the taxpayers. And, it takes the effort, good judgment, and compassion of a community to be the guide and a "hand up" for those who hit a bump in the road.

If there is one thing I know for sure, it is that Texans respect hard work. There is something important about the sense of accomplishment and self- reliance that comes from doing a good job. Government policies should help foster this self-reliant spirit.

No one piece of legislation will be a panacea for our country's social ills, but building on the success of the past six years can help create greater economic freedom and a higher standard of living for all our citizens.